

Shin Buddhism

Part I

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THOSE OF YOU who are accustomed to listening to the usual explanations of Pure Land Buddhism may find my lectures on this subject unusual and unorthodox, but I am willing to take that criticism. Ordinarily speaking, Pure Land doctrine is heavily laden with all kinds of what I call “accretions,” which are not altogether necessary in order for modern people to get at the gist of the teaching.

For instance, Amida is the principal subject of Pure Land Buddhism. He is represented as being so many feet in height and endowed with the excellent physical features of a great man; he emits beams of light from his body, illuminating the world—not just one world, but many worlds, defying human calculation or measurement; and on every ray of light that comes out of his body, in fact, from every pore of his skin, there are so many Buddha-lands, decorated in a most extravagant manner. The descriptions almost exceed the imagination.

Of course this too is the product of man’s mind, so I cannot really say it is beyond human imagination. But we can see how the Indian mind, more than any other, is richly endowed with the ability to create imagery. When you read the sutras and listen to the old ways of explaining Pure Land doctrine, you will be surprised at how differently those people viewed such things, when compared with our modern way of thinking.

I am not going to touch upon these traditional aspects of the doctrine, so I am afraid my own explanations will be somewhat prosaic,

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devoid of the usual glamor and rich imagery. In a way, it will be Amida religion brought down to earth; but at the same time the doctrine is not to be treated from the intellectual point of view, on the relative plane of thought. It is after all altogether beyond human intellection.

The Pure Land and Amida are revealed on this earth, though not as is taught by orthodox preachers. The Pure Land is not many millions and millions of miles away to the west. According to my explanation, the Pure Land is right here. Those who have eyes to see it can see it right here, even in this very hall. Amida is not presiding over a Pure Land beyond our reach. His Pure Land is this dirty earth itself. When I explain things in this way I am going directly against the traditional or conventional Pure Land doctrine. However, I have my own explanations and interpretations, and perhaps after these lectures are over you will agree with them, though of that I cannot be quite sure!

A Japanese Shin Buddhist friend of mine in Brazil recently wrote to me, requesting that I write out the essential teachings of the Pure Land school in English for the Buddhists there, because they found it difficult to translate such things from Japanese into Portuguese. He wanted me to present it so as to make Amida and Pure Land doctrine appear somewhat similar to Christianity, at least superficially, and yet to retain characteristic features of the Pure Land doctrine. So I sent the following to him. Whether he agreed with my views or not, I do not know. You might say I wrote it for my own edification.¹

First: We believe in Amida Butsu, Amitabha Buddha, as Saviour of all beings. ("Saviour" is not a word often used among Buddhists; it is a kind of condescension to the Christian way of thinking.) This Amida Buddha is eternal life and infinite light. And all beings are born in sin and laden with sin. (This idea of sin is to be specially interpreted to give it a Buddhist color, which I will do later on.)

Second: We believe in Amida Buddha as our Oya-sama. (Sometimes the more familiar "Oya-san" is used in place of "Oya-sama," but the latter is more generally used. Oya-sama, in this context, means love or compassion. Strictly speaking, there is no word corresponding to Oya-sama in English or any European languages. *Oya* means parent, and *-sama* is an honorific suffix. *Oya* can mean either father or mother, and

¹ The portions in parentheses in the following three paragraphs contain Dr. Suzuki's comments on the original written statement he sent to his friend.—Eds.

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can also mean both of them; not separately, but mother and father as one. Motherly qualities and fatherly qualities are united in Oya. In Christianity God is addressed as Father: "Our father which art in Heaven." But Oya-sama is not in heaven, nor is Oya-sama the Father. Oya-sama is neither a "he" nor a "she." I don't like to say "it," so I am at a loss what to say. Oya-sama is such a peculiar word, so endearing and at the same time so full of religious significance.)

Third: We believe that salvation ("salvation" is not a good word here, but I am trying to comply with my friend's request) consists in pronouncing the name of Amida in sincerity and with devotion. (This pronouncing the name of Amida may not be considered so important, but names have certain magical powers. When a name is uttered, the object bearing that name is conjured up.)

In *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, when the devil's name is pronounced, the devil appears. Among some primitive peoples, the name of the supreme being is kept a secret. It is revealed only to those who have gone through certain rituals. The initiate is led by one of the elders of the religion into a dense forest where there is no danger of being overheard by anybody. Then the elder reveals the name to him. By knowing the name, the initiate is now fully qualified as a leader himself. The name plays an important role in religious life.

Amida's name is pronounced in sincerity and with devotion. The formula is *Namu-amida-butsu*. *Butsu* is Buddha, *namu* means "I take refuge": I take refuge in Amida Buddha. Or we may take *namu* as meaning adoration to Amida Buddha. It is a simple formula. There is nothing especially mysterious about it, and you may wonder how this name or phrase could have such wonderful power.

Now I have to say something about *hongan*. *Hongan*, according to my interpretation, is the primal will. This primal will is at the foundation of all reality. *Hongan* as expressed in the *Sutra of Eternal Life* consists of 48 different vows, but all 48 may be summarized in one basic vow, or *hongan*, which is: Amida wants to save all beings. Amida desires to have all beings brought over to his land, which is the land of purity and bliss. And those who earnestly, sincerely, and devotedly believe in Amida, will all be born in the Pure Land.

This birth does not take place after what is called death. To sincere followers of the Pure Land, instead of being born in the Pure Land, the Pure Land itself is created or comes into existence when we sincere-

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ly pronounce *Namu-amida-butsu*. Therefore, instead of going over to the Pure Land, the Pure Land comes to us. In a way, we are carrying the Pure Land within us all along, and when we pronounce that magic formula *Namu-amida-butsu*, we become conscious of the presence of the Pure Land around us, or rather, in us.

The *hon* of *hongan* means original or primal, and *gan* is generally translated "vow." But I have misgivings about using vow as an equivalent for *gan*. Sometimes it is translated "prayer." *Gan* means literally "wish" or "desire." Philosophically speaking, it may be better to say "will," so that *hongan* would be rendered "primal will." Why *gan* cannot properly be translated as "vow," "prayer," "wish," or "desire" will become clearer later. I am just trying to give you an idea now of how I interpret some of these terms.

I

I wrote a little book called *A Miscellany on the Shin Teaching of Buddhism* which was published in Japan in 1949. It contains rather fragmentary explanations of the Shin teaching, but parts of it may be helpful in gaining a general view of Shin Pure Land Buddhism.

The Pure Land teaching originated in China, but it reached its full development in the Japanese Shin school of Pure Land Buddhism. The Shin school is the culmination of Pure Land thought, and that culmination took place in Japan. The Japanese may not have very many original ideas to contribute to world thought or world culture, but in Shin we find one major contribution Japanese can make to the outside world. There is one other major Buddhist school that developed in Japan, the Nichiren sect. But all the other schools more or less trace their origin as well as their form either to China or to India. Nichiren is more or less related to the nationalistic spirit of Japan and is often confused with nationalism. But Shin is absolutely free of such connections; in that respect, Shin is remarkable.

Shinran, the founder of the Shin sect, was born in Kyoto about eight hundred years ago. He is generally made out to be of noble lineage, but that I suspect is fiction. His family was probably relatively cultured and may well have belonged to the higher levels of society, but their connection, if any, to the aristocracy was I think remote. In any case, his real religious development took place when he was exiled to the country,

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far from the capital, the center of culture in those days. He was a follower of Hōnen, founder of the Pure Land (Jōdo) school in Japan. Hōnen's influence was very great at the time, and priests belonging to the older established schools did not like that. Somehow they contrived to have Hōnen banished to Tosa, then a remote area of the country. Shinran was also exiled, to the northern part of Japan. His decisive religious experience really took place during this exile, while he was living among the common people. He understood well their spiritual needs. In those days Buddhism was somewhat aristocratic, and the study of Buddhism was mainly confined to the learned few, who were rather addicted to learning. But Shinran knew that mere learning was not the way to religious experience. There had to be a more direct way that did not require the medium of learning or ritual. In fact, to experience a full awakening of the religious consciousness, all such things must first be cast aside. Such mediums would only interfere with our attempts to directly attain this full awakening, which is the consummation of the religious life. Shinran came to realize this himself, and he finally found the most direct way to the attainment of this awakening.

Let me read a bit now from *A Miscellany on the Shin Teaching*:

Of all the developments Mahayana Buddhism has achieved in the Far East, the most remarkable one is the Shin teaching of the Pure Land school. It is remarkable, according to my judgment, chiefly for the reason that geographically its birthplace is Japan and historically it is the latest and highest evolution the Pure Land teaching could have reached. The Pure Land idea originated in India [because the sutras used by this sect were originally compiled in India, the ideas must have developed first in India] and the sutras devoted to its exposition were compiled probably about three hundred years after Buddha [that is, about one or two centuries before the Christian era]. The school bearing its name, however, started in China towards the end of the fifth century when the White Lotus Society was organised by Hui-yüan (334-416) and his friends in 403. The idea of a Buddha-land which is presided over by a Buddha is probably as old as Buddhism, but a school based upon the desire to be born in such a land in order to attain the final end of the Buddhist life, did not fully

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materialise until Buddhism began to flourish in China as a practical religion. It took the Japanese genius of the thirteenth century to mature it further into the teaching of the Shin school. Some may wonder how the Mahayana could have expanded into the doctrine of Pure Land faith, which apparently stands in direct contradiction to the Buddha's supposedly original teaching of self-reliance and enlightenment by means of *prajñā*.²

II

[Dr. Suzuki explains the following Shin terms at the blackboard]

Amida is standing on one side, and on the other side is *bombu* (or *bompu*), the ordinary people, just as we all are. We sometimes see this term rendered as "all beings" in English. Amida Buddha is the *hō* [Dharma], and we *bombu* are *ki*. *Hō* and *ki* are difficult terms to translate. *Hō* is on the other side and *ki* is on this side. Religious teachings start from the relationship between them. *Hō* might be considered as corresponding to God or Christ, and *ki* is this sinful person. *Hō* is the other-power, and *ki* is self-power. Other-power and self-power stand in contrast; and in order to be born in the Pure Land, self-power is to be altogether abandoned and other-power embraced. In fact, when self-power is embraced by other-power, self-power turns into other-power; or, other-power "takes up" self-power altogether.

Or again, on one side we have the Pure Land, and on the other side this world. "This world" is more commonly called *shaba* in Japanese and Chinese—it is a Sanskrit term originally. The other world is called Jōdo. (*Jō* means pure, *do* is land, or "Pure Land.") *Shaba* is, we might say, the land of defilement. So there is Jōdo, the land of purity, or the Pure Land, and *shaba*, the defiled land. The Pure Land is the realm of the absolute, and *shaba* the realm of relativity.

When we pronounce *Namu-amida-butsu*, Amida is on one side and *namu* is on the other. *Namu* represents self-power or *ki*; Amida is *hō*, the other-power. *Namu-amida-butsu* symbolizes the unification of *ki*

² The text given here has been revised to include several revisions written into the author's personal copy. The remarks set off by brackets are comments made during the lecture.—Eds.

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and *hō*, Amida and *bompu*, self-power and other-power, *shaba* and Pure Land—they are unified, identified. So when *Namu-amida-butsu* is pronounced, it represents or symbolizes the unification of the two. “Unification” is not an adequate term, but its meaning will hopefully become clearer.

Now Amida is on the other side, the *bompu* is on this side, and *shaba* is where we are. The Pure Land reveals itself when we realize what we are, or, what Amida is. Other-power is very much emphasized in Shin teaching. When Amida and other-power are understood, the Pure Land will be understood too. When Amida's essential quality is understood, *hongan* and compassion, or love, also become known. It is just like holding a cloth at the central part; if you pull the middle up, all the rest comes with it.